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Testimony in Support of House Bill 7967 House Committee on Judiciary - March 27, 2024

Chairman Craven and the Members of the Committee:

The Coalition to End Homelessness strongly urges the Committee to support the passage of H7967, which would provide much-needed updates to the Homeless Bill of Rights. This is necessary because the law that many of you helped pass is not being followed. This legislation is a crucial step towards upholding the fundamental rights and dignity of all individuals, including those experiencing homelessness.

In 2012, Rhode Island became the first state to formally protect the rights of those experiencing homelessness under the leadership of John Joyce and Senator Tassoni. It was a great day in RI when the bill was signed into law. The Homeless Bill of Rights states: "No person's rights, privileges, or access to public services may be denied or abridged solely because he or she is homeless. Such a person shall be granted the same rights and privileges as any other resident of this state." We were a model for the country. Connecticut and Illinois followed suit and the law is currently under consideration by at least 7 other states. Sadly, in RI, we have dozens of incidents every year where the law is not being adhered to. Enhancements need to be made to enforce the original legislation and protect people whose rights have been violated.

First and foremost, it is essential to recognize that homelessness is not merely a housing issue, but a complex societal problem rooted in systemic inequalities, economic disparities, and insufficient support systems. People experiencing homelessness face numerous challenges daily, including discrimination, harassment, lack of access to basic services, and violations of their civil liberties. The Homeless Bill of Rights represents a significant opportunity to address these injustices and provide much-needed protection for our most vulnerable community members. On March 18th, there were 495 Rhode Islanders who reported they spent at least one night outside in the last 2 weeks. This number represents a 597% increase in unsheltered homelessness over the past four years. I urge you to consider the profound impact that the Homeless Bill of Rights can have on the lives of hundreds of individuals who are struggling to survive without stable housing.

Improving the Homeless Bill of Rights is essential to ensure that it effectively addresses the complex needs and challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness. The recommended updates will:

- 1.) **Provide Comprehensive Protection:** The existing Homeless Bill of Rights lacks the protections needed to comprehensively address the rights and needs of homeless individuals. Enhancements include giving proper notice to disband an encampment, offering a reasonable alternative place to relocate, collaborating with outreach workers, and providing trash receptacles and port-a-potties.
- 2.) **Address Legal Loopholes:** There are legal loopholes in the current legislation that undermine its effectiveness in protecting the rights of individuals who are experiencing homelessness. In the updated version, a suit may be brought by an aggrieved individual or an organization that is chartered to safeguard civil liberties or combat homelessness. This helps close loopholes and ensures that its provisions are enforceable.



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3.) Enhance Enforcement Mechanisms: Strengthening the enforcement mechanisms of the Homeless Bill of Rights can help ensure that its provisions are effectively implemented and upheld. The new language requires police and public works departments to have written policies and procedures on encampments that are reflective of the law, including a clear ban on law enforcement searches inside tents.

4.) Incorporate Feedback from Stakeholders: revisiting the language in the law enables input from people experiencing homelessness, advocates, service providers, and other stakeholders; which is crucial for identifying areas of improvement in the Homeless Bill of Rights.

5.) Adapt to Evolving Challenges: Homelessness is a complex and evolving issue that requires legislation to adapt to changing circumstances and emerging challenges. Improving the Homeless Bill of Rights will involve provisions to address new issues and emerging social and economic factors contributing to living in places not meant for human habitation.

6.) Promote Accountability and Transparency: Enhancements to the Homeless Bill of Rights can promote greater accountability and transparency in addressing homelessness at both the state and local levels. This may help to ensure that resources are allocated equitably to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

In conclusion, I wholeheartedly endorse the updates to the Homeless Bill of Rights and urge you to support its passage. Let us stand together in solidarity with our neighbors who are unhoused and work towards a future where everyone has a place to call home and the opportunity to live with dignity and respect.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

In Service,

Margaux Morisseau